Maso To The Rescue

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SHE stood on the *lanai* in front of the Chili-pepper bush, making me her three little bows. From the top coil of her satiny hair to the thong of her two-inch-high lacquered sandals, she might have stepped off the Tokyo fan in my drawing-room cabinet.

There are Japanese women galore in Hawaii; but the blight of Western civilization is upon most of them. They wear dirty blue cotton "Mother Hubbards" and shapeless straw hats; they are unclassified and hideous.

But Tia, in her silver-gray kimono, with her gold and blue *obi* folded about her tiny waist and looped over an absurd little horsehair pillow behind; with her two-toed stockings ending at the ankle and hooking up the sides; with her skin like old ivory, her pouted red lips and long-fringed eyes; Tia was Japan—the Orient. The flutter of cherry blossoms, the breath of almond boughs, came with her.

"What shall I do?" I demanded of the household. "She has just arrived in the Islands. She doesn't know a word of English. She has never seen a cooking stove, or a knife and fork, or a spring bed—"

"Keep her!" chorused the household, with deep bass emphasis from the masculine portion.

"Maso!" I called, opening the dining-room door with trepidation. Maso was our Japanese chef and factotum, a force always to be reckoned with and under no circumstances to be disturbed. A lean, crabbed bachelor of forty was Maso, with superior views of his own importance, and a lofty disdain of petticoats Western and, presumably, Japanese. He spoke the most precise English, wore long-tailed coats and a brown Fedora, and was one of the pillars of the local church. I held my breath as he sauntered in, a blue-checked dish towel flung over his shoulder, and gazed beneath his half-closed lids at the vision under the Chili-pepper bush.

Human nature is the same from the days of Helen! One eye-flash—and Maso, conquered, was leading her kitchenwards his Japanese amenities mingling with her gurgling laugh.

It was worth Tia's wages just to hear that laugh! From the time she pattered in with her gay *"Ohayo!"* in the morning to the last *"Sayonara!"* flung over her shoulders at night, life and work were one long jest to her. She pervaded the place like a butterfly. It was Tia in the drawing-room with a feather duster half as big as herself; Tia in the kitchen swinging her heels from a tall wooden chair and eating radishes and *shoyu;* Tia among the ginger blossoms reaching high above her head to pluck the creamy stalk; and Tia at the gate, making three bows to *O-Tsuki-San,* the white moon in the sky. It cannot be said that training her into a high-class waitress and chambermaid did not have its drawbacks. There were times when the Japanese dictionary, Dumb Crambo and Delsarte combined failed to convey the slightest impression. I cannot truthfully say we ever understood each other in those first days, but we often divined each other; and when divination failed, we sat down and laughed, which is sometimes better for the soul than much comprehension.

And to see her arranging flowers, with her glossy head side-tilted like a bird's, her red under lip sucked in and her tiny hands poising over the blossoms till they caught that ineffable blend of Art and Nature which is the mystery of Japan; to see her toddling about the dining table with her funny short steps, her long sleeves thrown over her shoulder and a ginger bloom in her hair, were compensations.

As to the masculine portion of the household, it succumbed to her to a man, and if she triumphed in the parlor, she tyrannized in the kitchen! Maso the haughty, Maso the taciturn, who smiled pityingly over suggestions of desserts and scorned preferences in potatoes, became Maso the suppliant.

He hung out Tia's washing for her, he emptied her tubs for her, he washed the dinner dishes (which was obviously her duty). Her impudent little sandals cluttered up his neat kitchen; her combs and hairpins littered his bachelor bedroom—for where else could *O-jo-san* Tia smooth her satiny locks?—and for return she laughed at him and teased him all day long; called him "old man" and "good-for-nothing," and treated him generally as the dust beneath her feet.

There were also others: Yamashito, the painter, who took three days to do one day's work, flirting with Tia at my expense; and carpenters and butcher boys and itinerant turnip sellers. O-jo-san Tia laughed at them all.

Then came Ishiwara, the barber. It might be said that Ishiwara was in the air from the beginning, but it was some time before he materialized.

If Tia was Japan feminine, Ishiwara was Japan masculine—a strapping lad, with square shoulders and lean flanks that would have done credit to a West Pointer. His blacking-brush hair, cropped close behind, grew longer on top and fell picturesquely almost to his eyebrows, and he wore always a blue-and-white kimono, girt with a white silk obi. He had been a soldier (so he told us), and his swagger was worth crossing half the Pacific to see. Maso, with his ill-fitting American clothes and stooping shoulders, was undistinguishable from the common herd, but Ishiwara might have been a Mikado incognito. One always expected him to stride into the garden with two swords thrust through his girdle, and a retinue of princes!

Twilight by twilight he came to sit on his heels under the banana trees and tell Tia tales of his prowess—magnificent tales, interspersed with many cigarettes (his fingers were mahogany colored with nicotine) and acted out with all the superb aplomb of the Oriental. Now he ground li-chi nuts beneath his heel like Chinese skulls; now he reconnoitred among the papai trees; now he crouched in ambush behind a royal palm; and now he charged upon platoons of ti-plants and swept them from the face of the earth!

Maso took no part in those seances. He retired to the tara patch on the other side of the kitchen and studied his catechism. Only once did he condescend to comment, when I ventured, in an ante-dinner interview, that Ishiwara was a mighty warrior. Maso, poising the Worcestershire sauce bottle over the soup kettle, lifted his languid eyelids: "He shave soldier," he said, and went calmly on stirring the soup.

But alas for Maso! Tia's heart, like that of many another maid, was snared in the noose of adventure. She took to wearing her most sumptuous kimono—the one with the pale-blue crepe lining and silken tassels—when she waited for Ishiwara under the banana trees, and for the kitchen there was naught but contumely.

Cupid, or his Japanese prototype, was reaching for a final shaft, when Fate, in the guise of a Porto Rican, interposed.

The Porto Ricans are Hawaii's latest ethnological acquisition. Before them we had only natives, Americans, English, Scotch and Frenchmen, Russians, Japs, Chinamen, Portuguese, Germans and Jews, interspersed with a few Malays, South Sea Islanders, American negroes and one Greek. The Porto Ricans were imported to work in the cane fields when United States laws deprived the planters of their natural resources, the Orient. As yet they have eaten a great deal, worked a very little, and shown a tendency—picturesque but inconvenient—to turn highwaymen.

There had been several hold-ups on the Olaa road, but none, from Ishiwara's account, comparable to his. He acted it all out for Tia in the shadow of the banana trees; how he was driving alone up the Olaa road when, from the guava bushes, there sprung to his horse's head four villains!—devils they were, with gleaming knives!—how they had unharnessed and stolen his steed; how they had forced him to descend and deliver his money (the money destined for a new obi for Tia); how he, the hero of a hundred fights, had been powerless, because weaponless, against their whelming numbers, and murderous blades!

Maso, studying his catechism in the taro patch, muttered one word, "Baka!" which, being interpreted, is "Fool!" but no one heard him save a small, green lizard, stalking mosquitoes on the kitchen wall.

Tia, sitting on her little white-stockinged heels, with her arms clasped around her knees, drank the tale with the indrawn, hissing breaths that are the Japanese expressions of emotion. But the next day she was pensive and cross—signs of perturbation common to sex, not race.

The following day my husband, who owns a coffee ranch on the Olaa road, decided to go up on his monthly tour of inspection and pay off his men. It was such a delectable opportunity for junketing in our small shanty among the tree-ferns, that I resolved to take the two servants and make a holiday—camping out sans someone to cook and wash dishes not being what fancy paints it.

So one dazzling mid-afternoon we started (Tia giggling beside Maso on the back seat), making a detour by Wainkea Bridge to inquire for a patient. Along the sea-front we went, where the low-roofed Oriental and Portuguese shops knock elbows and two donkeys laden with sugar-cane fill the width of the street; over the bridge, where high-peaked Japanese fishing boats are moored and babies of all races splash, frog-like, in the stream, and up to the Chinese banana merchant's, whose little girl was ill.

One of the handsome khaki-clad native policemen, always on guard on the bridge, lounged over to us just as we started again.

"Going mauka, Doctor?" he asked. (There are but two directions in Hawaii: "mauka," toward the mountain, and "mauka," toward the sea.) "Not afraid of a hold-up, eh?"

"No more than of an eruption," said my husband, nodding toward the tranquil slope of Mauna Loa. "This fear of Porto Ricans is all moonshine, Koloha."

Koloha shook his handsome head thoughtfully. "They bad lot," he said. "Bad lot. Pilikia (trouble) at Nine Miles this morning. We got up himeby with patrol wagon. So, if you get hold-up, Doctor," he called after us as we started, "we'll be behind you." We laughed back at him as we drove away. The breath of the sea was in our nostrils, the blue height beyond beckoned, and we were in holiday mood.

But, alas! the best laid plans of men—and doctors—gang aglee. At the town's end a galloping messenger summoned my husband back to a sick woman, and after a hasty consultation we decided that I should go on with the servants and he would follow later in the patrol wagon. So I changed to the rear seat with Tia, and Maso climbed in front, impressed with the importance of guarding not only us, but the canvas bag of coin beneath our feet.

Tia pointed to his thin arms, tittering. "Maso no good," she said to me. "Ishiwara big man." She puffed out like a pouter pigeon. "Maso leelee man." She shrunk, voice and body, in the corner of the carriage, then caught the ends of her long sleeves up to her lips with a burst of laughter.

Maso gave no sign of having heard. He did not look one's ideal of a champion, with his brown Fedora pushed to the nape of his neck, and his sloping shoulders.

But if a passing fear of brigands was upon us, it vanished with the wind in our faces as we went upward. Flocks of tiny rice birds, no bigger than one's thumb, fluttered from the guava bushes, and saucy, yellow-legged mynahs, mynahs, spreading wing and tail until every white feather showed in the brown, ran audaciously athwart the horse's heels. Wood doves cooed in the mango trees; the cane fields rustled their green ribbons; the land began to slope more steeply; the shadows lay across the road; below us the town curved like an arm about the blue sea line, and across the valley, Mauna Kea, capped with snow, lifted itself cloud-free against the sunset.

"All same Fuji-san!" cried Tia, clapping her hands in delight, as we glanced backward. And at that instant, even as it had happened to Ishiwara, four men sprang from the shadows of the roadside and clutched at the reins.

There was a sharp cry of command from Haso, and Tia fell on her knees in the bottom of the carriage, dragging me and the linen carriage robe down with her.

I am not a person of much courage, and the little I had went from me as I peered through the loose mesh of the robe at those swarty, ferocious faces and the gleaming cane knives. They were pouring out a torrent of profanity and threats, from which came only the English word "Money! Money!" and the man who screamed it shook his knife almost in Maso's eyes—"Money, queek!"

Maso stared back at him stolidly, squaring his shoulders to shield the back of the carriage.

"No got," he said dully. "No got." He leaned forward, pointing with his whip to the two men clumsily unfastening the traces. "You want horse?"

He climbed slowly down from the carriage, and my last hope died within me as I saw him tying up the reins, unbuckling the straps, leading Brown Meg free of the shafts and turning her in the road.

The Porto Ricans stood over him grinning—all but one, who still glowered and muttered.

Then suddenly, like lightning from a clear sky, the full length of the heavy carriage whip, backed by Maso's tense sinews, descended on Brown Meg's flank. Never, in all her pampered, petted life, had such indignity been hers. She reared, with an almost human screech, and then, again heavily smitten from behind, shot off, a very catapult of wrath and terror, down the road to Hilo.

In the instant's gaping vantage that was his, Maso wheeled on his foes. Like a scorpion's lash the swinging whip cord struck and struck and struck. A whirling dervish, Maso spun in the dust of the road, and every blow brought blood. With screams of rage the men sprang at him, striving to close upon him, to get beneath, above, around, that awful scourge. They could have as well withstood the sword play of a Crichton!

Five seconds—ten—and the robbers had fled, howling, into the cane, and Maso, seated calmly on a fern stump, was rolling a cigarette.

IN THE INSTANT'S GAPING VANTAGE THAT WAS HIS, MASO WHEELED ON HIS FOES

I was laughing and sobbing, both at once—the absurdity of it! and the absolute, blind, audacious courage of it! And Tia was saying under her breath, "Saigo! Saigo! Saigo!" Saigo is the Heró of Japan.

It had all so flashed upon us that but for the empty shafts and that cruel knife dropped in the road dust, I should have thought it some hideous dream. I pulled myself to the seat, gasping, but Maso put up a warning hand, and I crouched again. The danger had not passed. At any moment they might return, and when they did it would mean—murder. Already the brief tropic twilight was upon us—in a little it would be night.

But Maso the brave, was also Maso the wise. He knew the Doctor's horse, carriageless and terror-stricken, would be harbinger of ill. In less time than seemed possible there came the pounding of hoofs, the roll of wheels, the gleam of lamps, and my husband, with three burly policemen, had sprung from the patrol wagon to the carriage side.

Tia and I clambored to earth then and the story was told, Maso puffing calmly at his cigarette the while. Only once did he speak, when Koloha, hitting him on the shoulder, cried: "They no get the money, old boy, eh?" His thin lips relaxed into complacency.

"Not one dam-cent," he said, and that is the only remark I ever heard from him anent the affair.

There was a council of war; then my husband, Tia and I went down the road a bit in the patrol wagon, and Maso (with the big policemen safely ambushed) stayed by the empty carriage to bait a trap—so successfully, that four welted Porto Ricans meditated their sins that night behind the pink walls of the Hilo jail.

I do not know the Japanese equivalent for "None but the brave deserves the fair," but Ishiwara learned it the next time he swaggered into my garden. A week later Tia appeared with her hair in a new fashion. Instead of a flat butterfly at the back of her head, it was piled in a marvelous fan-shaped roll on top. She expressed great surprise at my ignorance in not perceiving at once that she was no longer "o-jo-san," but "o-kami san," and informed me, incidentally, that she and Maso had set up housekeeping in his erstwhile bachelor bedroom.

That was a year ago, and if you doubt this story, come to my garden at twilight and you will find Tia scrubbing a wee, ivory-tinted godling under the kitchen pump, and soothing his protestations with the tale of how his honorable father whipped the robbers on the Olaa road.